



Art Books

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Depero Futurista

by Nick Bennett

Depero Futurista

(Designers & Books/Museum of Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto/Center for Italian Modern Art, 2017)

In 1915, as a newly admitted member of the Italian Futurist movement, Fortunato Depero along with Giacomo Balla set out to “reconstruct the universe, cheering it up and recreating it entirely.” For Depero, this meant a lifelong output typifying a truly modern life; he designed costumes for a ballet envisioning the “Machine of the Year 3000,” toys to stimulate the imaginations and intellect of children, colorful suit vests to distinguish the Futurists from the bourgeois status quo, and created what many consider to be one of the first artist’s books: *Depero Futurista*—a compendium of his paintings, sculptures, typographic manifestos, designs for advertisements and textiles, and architectural visions, bound by two aluminum bolts, hence the book’s well-known nom de guerre—the bolted book.



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This iconic, and until now, incredibly rare artist’s book was first published in 1927 by Dinamo-Azari, a Futurist art gallery and publishing house in Milan run by lawyer, pilot, artist, poet, and collector Fedele Azari. Azari’s publishing outfit declared the book as “MECHANICAL: bolted like an engine ...

DANGEROUS: can be used as a projectile ... UNCLASSIFIABLE: cannot be placed alongside other books in a library.” This new facsimile edition, the result of a collaboration by Designers & Books in Brooklyn, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Rovereto, and the Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) in New York (by way of a successful Kickstarter campaign) makes available this machine-book as Depero intended, with its 240 unnumbered pages of varying paper types and inks. If one chooses to unscrew the bolts, the pages can be rearranged and displayed as individual works of art—which is exactly what CIMA did for its inaugural exhibition in 2014, concurrent to the Guggenheim’s *Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, the first comprehensive overview of Futurism shown in the United States. Both exhibitions critically reconsidered Depero’s role as one of the most daring and prolific members of the group, and the CIMA exhibit went further to highlight Depero’s work beyond the Futurist

group, as it converged with Dada and Metaphysical Painting, Esprit Nouveau and Art Deco, the Bauhaus, and other movements.

For Depero, this book served as portfolio, resume, and traveling museum for his output from 1913 to 1927. Stylistically refined yet readily accessible, the work served as both fine art and advertisement as his paintings, dynamic sculptures, and illustrations made their way to collectors, but also to publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and the *New York Daily News*. His designs also landed on pillows produced and sold by Macy's, and most famously, on the desks of executives at the apéritif brand Campari. In fact, his bottle design for Campari soda, designed in 1932, is still in production to this day, unchanged.

The relationship between a book and an artist's means of self-promotion is one of the most vital contributions of *Depero Futurista*; if form follows function, then this book's form is self-advertisement. In one of his many typographic manifestos, "The Need for Self-Advertisement," Depero sets the words on the page in the shape of an arrowhead, sharp and precise. "Self-promotion is not a vain, futile or exaggerated expression of megalomania," Depero tells us. "It is instead the irrepressible need to let the public know, and fast, of one's creations and ideas. In every field of endeavor, except in the art world, the most clamorous promotion is allowed and even lauded; every industrialist can and does promote his products vigorously. [...]

An artist needs to be acknowledged, appreciated, and celebrated during his lifetime; and he therefore has the right to employ all the most effective and original means to promote his genius and his work." There's no need to name artists of the last one hundred years who have taken this advice to heart.

Part of this approach to self-advertisement utilized the power of praise and exaggeration: Depero himself proclaimed his book "the most groundbreaking art book of its time," as an edition of "bolted machinery," that "has nothing in common with other books. It is an art object in itself, a typically Futurist work of art." Likewise, Marinetti praised the book as "the most original book, most powerful and most Futurist ever seen in the world. Its *parolibere* [words-in-freedom] gears turn right in the great planetary and stellar wheels. The Depero book—a typographic racing car—was evidently printed in the heavens on paper made from the Milky Way, beneath explosions of grenades and arc lamps, with 300 natural suns added." In his book, *Introduction to Modernity* (1961) the twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Lefebvre writes, "Artists destroy art, art self-destructs, and this destruction takes place principally on the level of language." For Depero and his fellow Futurists, any form of printed matter became the playground of radical, artistic play. Roman type, the traditional lettering of typography and the basis of the printed word itself, became a modern explosive born out of an already flammable substance. This typographic experimentation, which is the star of *Depero Futurista*, showcases Depero's mastery of linguistic subversion and manipulation through techniques such as *onomalingua* [poetic language based on onomatopoeia]. One such page combines the narrative of a passenger in stream of consciousness style focused on being late for an appointment and being hungry; the dynamism of the passage escalates with the inclusion of nonsensical machine language, whose description culminates in the train striking and killing a pedestrian, followed by a fragmentary obituary quoting a Latin requiem mass. Other pages require the reader to rotate the page—or



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themselves—in order to read a circular manifesto, a nod to Cubism’s fracturing of pictorial space to provide multiple perspectives. A gatefold reproduction of “Depero Glorified by Marinetti” praises Depero himself in a concrete poem that takes the form of nothing less than his own name.

Depero and Azari intended to print one thousand copies of this book, but as it turned out to be a major financial strain for both, the original, lesser number of published copies remains unknown to this day. Though edited reprints were produced in 1978 and 1987, most known copies of these original and reprint editions are owned by institutions, and so are not available to the public. This new facsimile edition proves the enduring influence of this classic of experimental design and its challenge to traditional notions of what makes a book.

Depero Futurista remains as daring and innovative today as it was one hundred years ago. It also proves the power a facsimile can have on a wider audience: something once obscure and widely unavailable is now here to engage and inspire a whole new generation. (In fact, you can view every page at www.boltedbook.com.) *Depero Futurista* challenges the book as both cultural and design object. It presents us with an inventive, synesthetic machine, just as it was seen by its creators. And its contents do operate as a machine does—as a system of instruments loudly and efficiently at work, transforming raw material into a product for mass consumption, an ingenious solution to the fatigue of convention.



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Nick Bennett is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



AMIR NIKRAVAN: *Rational Design*

by Ian Cofre

OCT 2017 | ARTSEEN

Los Angeles based artist Amir Nikravan has taken a singular, pill-like form he encountered in Pasadena’s Stuart Building—a site originally known as the Stuart Pharmaceutical Company Office and Plant (1958)—and he’s given it a treatment of rupture and reconfiguration for *Rational Design*, his first solo show at Karg Gallery.



Negotiating Gender, Labor, and Authorship:

Thinking Machines: Art and Design in the Computer Age, 1959-1989

by Banyl Huang

FEB 2018 | ARTSEEN

In what ways have machines reconfigured or reconsolidated pre-existing social hierarchies, human relations, and cultural production?



Reid & Harriet: A Site for New Approaches to Production Design

by Caroline Stinger

MAY 2018 | DANCE

The house lights dim to a smolder and dancers dart one-by-one into the Guggenheim's Peter B. Lewis Theater, following rounded aisles onto the stage.



Design for Dying

by Adele Tutter

FEB 2016 | ARTSEEN

In ancient civilizations, miniature structures of everyday life or the imagined afterlife were often placed alongside the deceased in tombs and burial sites. We are familiar with the funeral boats of ancient Egypt and the terracotta soldiers of ancient China; far less well known are the architectural models found in ancient Mesoamerican and Andean tombs.

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